

Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

2 *Bill Jones, a Tale of Wonder*

“Now, well-a-day!” the sailor said,  
    “Some danger doth impend:  
Three ravens sit in yonder glade,  
And harm will happen, I’m sore afraid,  
    Ere we reach our journey’s end.” 5

“And what have the ravens with us to do?  
    Does their sight then bode us evil?”  
“Why, to find one raven ’tis lucky, ’tis true;  
But ’tis certain misfortune to light on two,  
    And meeting with three is the devil.” 10

“I’ve known full three score years go by,  
    And only twice before  
I’ve seen three ravens near me fly;  
And twice good cause to wish had I,  
    That I ne’er might see them more.” 15

“The first time I was wreck’d at sea;  
    The second time, by fire  
I lost my wife and children three  
That selfsame night; and woe is me  
    That I did not then expire!” 20

“Still do I hear their screams for aid,  
    Which to give was past man’s power;  
I saw in earth their coffins laid, —  
Well, my heart of marble must be made,  
    Since it did not break that hour!” 25

“Poor soul! your tale of many woes  
    Brings tears into my eyes:  
But think you, then, such ills arose  
Because you saw your fancied foes,  
    Three ravens, near you rise?” 30

“No doubt, since this fantastic fear  
Has thus possess’d your head,  
You firmly believe that ghosts appear,  
And that dead men rise from their blood-stain’d bier,  
To haunt the murderer’s bed.” 35

“Believe it, master! well I may!  
Now mark what I relate;  
For Gospel-true are the words I say,  
When I swear, that, during three weeks and a day,  
A GHOST was my own shipmate. 40

“My cash run low — no beef, no flip,  
And times were hard to live;  
So I e’en resolved to make a trip  
For slaves, on board a Guinea ship,  
Which crime may God forgive! 45

“Oh, ’twas a sad, sad thing to hear  
The negroes scream and groan,  
And curse the billows which bore them near  
To the tyrant white-man’s land of fear,  
And far, far away from their own! 50

“But soon the sailor found his part  
Scarce better than the slaves;  
For our captain had a tiger’s heart,  
And he plagued his crew with such barbarous art,  
We all wish’d us in our graves. 55

“We scarce were two days’ sail from port,  
Ere many a back was flay’d;  
He flogg’d us oft in wanton sport;  
His heart was of stone, not flesh — in short,  
He was fit for such a trade. 60

“Though each in turn was treated ill,  
’Mongst all the crew alone  
Bill Jones opposed our tyrant’s will;  
For Bill was cross and old, and still

He'd give him back his own. 65

“And many a brutal harsh command  
Old Bill had grumbled at;  
Till once he was order'd a sail to hand,  
When Bill was so weak he scarce could stand,  
But the captain scoff'd at that. 70

“For a lazy old brute, poor Bill he abused,  
And forced him aloft to go;  
But their duty to do his limbs refused,  
And at length from the ropes his hands Bill loosed,  
And he fell on the deck below. 75

“Towards him straight the captain flew,  
Crying, ‘Dog! dost serve me so?’  
And with devilish spite his sword he drew,  
And ran Bill Jones quite through and through;  
And the blow was a mortal blow. 80

“At the point of death poor Bill now lies,  
And stains the deck with gore;  
And fixing his own on his murderer's eyes,  
‘Captain! alive or dead,’ he cries,  
‘I ne'er will leave you more!’ 85

“‘You wont?’ says the captain: ‘time will show  
If you keep your word or not;  
For now in the negro kettle below,  
Old dog! your scoundrel limbs I'll throw,  
And I'll see what fat you've got.’ 90

“So he caused the cook to make water hot,  
And the corpse, both flesh and bones,  
(To see what fat Bill Jones had got)  
The captain boil'd in the negro pot,  
But there was not much fat in Jones. 95

“If well his word the captain kept,  
Bill Jones kept his as well;  
For just at midnight, all who slept,

With one consent, from their hammocks leapt,  
Roused by a dreadful yell. 100

“Never was heard a more terrible sound:  
Fast to the deck we hied,  
And there, by the moonbeam’s light, we found  
The murder’d man, in spite of his wound,  
Sitting close to the steersman’s side. 105

“And from that hour, among the rest  
Bill served, nor left us more;  
With bloody trousers, bloody vest,  
And bloody shirt, and bloody breast,  
Still he stood our eyes before. 110

“And he’d clean the deck, or fill the pail,  
Or he’d work with right good will  
To stop a leak, or drive a nail;  
But whenever the business was handing a sail,  
Then ’specially ready was Bill. 115

“And to share in all things with the crew  
Did the spectre never miss;  
And when to the cook, for his portion due,  
Each sailor went, Bill Jones went too,  
And tender’d his platter for his. 120

“His face look’d pale, his limbs seem’d weak,  
His footsteps fell so still,  
That to hear their sound you’d vainly seek;  
And to none of the crew did Bill e’er speak,  
And none of us spoke to Bill. 125

“But when three weeks had crept away,  
As you just now have heard,  
The captain came upon deck one day,  
And quoth he “My lads, I’ve something to say;  
Bill Jones is as good as his word. 130

“He never leaves me day nor night,  
He haunts me — haunts me still;

By the midnight lamp I see the spright,  
And when at morn the sky grows light,  
The first sunbeam shows me Bill. 135

“At meals, his pale lips speak the grace,  
His cold hand gives me wine;  
At every hour, in every place,  
To whatever side I turn my face,  
Bill’s eyes are fix’d on mine. 140

“Now, lads, my resolution’s made,  
One means will set me free,  
And Bill’s pursuit for ever evade.  
He comes — he comes! Then, away!’ he said,  
And plunged into the sea. 145

“None moved a joint the wretch to save,  
All stood with staring eyes;  
Each clasp’d his hand — a groan each gave,  
When, lo! on a sudden, above the wave,  
Once more did the captain rise. 150

“Fix’d and fearful was his eye,  
And pale as a corpse his brow,  
And we saw him clasp his hands on high,  
And we heard him scream with a terrible cry,  
‘By God! Bill’s with me now!’ 155

“Then down he sunk through the foaming flood  
To hell, that worst of havens!  
Now Heaven preserve you, master good,  
From perilous rage and innocent blood,  
And from meeting with three ravens!” 160

1808

(From *The Life and Correspondence of M. G. Lewis*. Vol. 2.  
London: Henry Colburn, 1839)